

**THE EMMETT TILL ACT: Open door to horrid truths  
U.S. bill would create funds necessary to bring long-time, hate-crime suspects to justice.**

By Christopher Dodd, John Lewis  
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"I decided that I would start with his feet, gathering strength as I went up," said Mamie Till, Emmett Till's mother. "I paused at his mid-section, because I knew that he would not want me looking at him. . . . I kept on up until I got to his chin. Then I was forced to deal with his face."

When Emmett Till's broken body was sent from Mississippi back to Chicago, his mother took one look at her son's body and demanded an open-casket funeral. Fifty thousand people came to see that body, and his battered face. There must be few things more wrenching for a mother than to put her deceased son on display. But she chose to do just that, rather than to seal the truth in a casket.

Fifty-two years ago, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy, was beaten and shot to death for allegedly whistling at a white woman in segregated Mississippi. An all-white jury took 67 minutes to acquit two white men of the murder; months later, they admitted the crime and spent the rest of their lives in freedom.

And now, we have named a bill in honor of Till, to expose the unpunished crimes of murderers like his and to confront the troubled history of race in America. This week, we celebrate the passage of the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act in the House of Representatives. Unfortunately, the only thing standing in the way of its Senate passage is a hold placed on it by U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.). His delaying tactics are postponing justice day by day, and we trust that he will overcome his faulty objections.

This bill creates two new civil rights positions in the Department of Justice to spearhead and coordinate federal, state, and local efforts to bring long-time fugitives to justice. It authorizes a potential \$10 million per year to be added to the Department of Justice budget for the purpose of investigating and prosecuting outstanding Civil Rights era crimes. It also authorizes \$1.5 million per year for outreach to garner the cooperation of local communities, and \$2 million in federal support to help state and local law enforcement officials prosecute these crimes.

The Till Act is not a reckless, unchecked spending measure. Under the pay-as-you-go rules of the House and Senate, initiated by the Democratic majority to rein in the excessive spending of the last Congress, the appropriations committees lead the effort to find ways to fund new congressional directives. This is done in a way that does not increase the record deficit initiated by years of reckless spending measures.

This legislation does not distribute new funds. Instead, it sets a spending ceiling that the Budget Committee and the Appropriations Committee in both the House and the Senate can use as a guide when they develop future federal budget and appropriations measures. In a federal budget that is nearing \$3 trillion, the allocations for this bill are not excessive. Republicans and Democrats voted for this bill because they understand that you cannot put a price on justice. The Emmett Till Act creates powerful new tools to unearth

evidence and bring it to trial. These are important steps toward repairing the integrity of our judicial system.

But it is still insufficient. There were many, many years in our country when hate crimes were rarely investigated, when murderers could walk free as long as they chose the right victims. Forty-three years ago, civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner were murdered in the town of Philadelphia, Miss. And more than four decades passed before a reckoning: Two years ago, Ku Klux Klan member Edgar Ray Killen was finally found guilty of their deaths.

The Emmett Till Act can't erase that memory. It can't take away a single year that lapsed between crime and justice. But it can keep even more years from piling on. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of civil rights-era crimes remain unsolved. If we want to remove a great stain on our justice system, we need to reopen the books on as many as we can. The hour is, obviously, very late. Memories are dimming. Those who can bring some truth to light are, unfortunately, passing away. So this bill may offer the last, best chance for our nation to write a hopeful postscript to its struggle for racial equality.

Perhaps some would call this a case of "too little, too late." And they'd be absolutely right. But every day that passes means "less and later." Every day, communities suffer under the unspoken burden of these crimes.

The Emmett Till Act is our chance to ease that burden for good. A trial goes far deeper than the victim and the accused: It is, as Schwerner's widow has said, "a public event through which a community attempts to confront a wrong. . . . Understanding our history is the necessary step toward ensuring that we move ahead as a society which is committed to healing our wounds, and achieving reconciliation."

Don't doubt that it will cost us — above all, in the ache of remembering violence that would be much more pleasing to forget. Emmett Till's mother felt that pain 52 years ago. But she knew that there was even worse pain in hiding the truth. Pull open the lid: "Here is the truth. Look."

> U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd is a Democrat from Connecticut. U.S. Rep. John Lewis is an Atlanta Democrat.